Medical crisis management: improving performance under pressure

The management of crises is an all-too-common professional requirement for intensive care clinicians. We work in fluid teams with colleagues from different disciplines and with differing levels of expertise. We desire astute, compassionate team members and leaders who are attuned to the strengths and frailties of the team they have around them, even if this team has been hastily convened from many disciplines and levels of experience.

The true nature of the medical crises that confront us daily include multiple layers of specific technical clinical skills, many non-technical cognitive and communication skills, and the ever-changing logistic difficulties of helping patients through complex hospital systems. Developing these skills requires clinical exposure and careful mentoring. The costs along the way of suboptimal performance are borne by patients, colleagues and one’s own self-satisfaction.

Immersive simulation-based teaching has been successful in helping individuals and teams understand how to best manage ourselves and our teams in crises. But simulation carries a significant cost with regards to time, skills and capital.

Intensive care specialists Carole Foot and Liz Steel, together with simulation centre director Dylan Campher, have produced an accessible learning package that drastically lowers the cost of entry into this valuable style of learning. There is no need to invest in technical equipment or know-how. There is no requirement to coordinate rosters among multiple participants and facilitators. Rather, a department could distribute this package to their target learners and leave them to work through it at their own pace.

The package contains a small textbook that provides a focused framework for considering the non-technical skills of managing oneself and others, and pertinent problem-solving techniques. The text is immediately practical and applicable with plenty of clear examples. The principles and techniques outlined in the text are illustrated by a number of clinical scenarios in an accompanying DVD.

The characters and scenarios are believable, and there is no hint of overacting. Some might say that the audio is particularly noisy and chaotic. However, any critical care clinician will tell you that this perfectly recreates the reality of these medical crises. I only fully appreciated the dialogue of many characters after multiple viewings. The dialogue captured the emotional turmoil these crises elicit. I felt like cringing on numerous occasions, when I acknowledged that yes, we are capable of treating our colleagues so poorly. Multiple versions of scenarios are included in the DVD so that learners can appreciate the difference that the use of crisis resource management principles can make to team performance and patient outcomes.

Finally, the package contains both a blank and completed workbook for learners to practise and review their analytical skills. The package takes the individual in a logical fashion through the principles in the text, to vicarious learning from the observation of others, to the provision of constructive feedback.

For additional value, reflecting upon or discussing the DVD cases as a group can help prepare teams that wish to use this as an introductory element to their own simulation and team-training activities.

This package is suitable for all critical care clinicians including junior and senior nurses as well as all levels of medical staff. It is very applicable to intensive care, emergency medicine, anaesthesia and acute medicine. I would recommend this package to critical care trainees undertaking fellowship examinations, nursing or medical educators involved in rapid-response teams, and consultant practitioners who wish to ensure they get the best out of themselves and their team.

The “holy grail” for team performance really has to be a multidisciplinary team capable of debriefing themselves constructively and openly after a crisis. This package provides an accessible first step to achieving such cohesion.

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